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AUTHOR Fuller, Rex M.; Goodyear, F. H.
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ABSTRACT

Although widely used, the term "interpersonal communication" does not have a commonly accepted definition which distinguishes it from several other types of communication. This paper examines this lack of specificity, as reflected in basic textbook definitions of the term, with regard to three dimensions of the interpersonal process: materials and contents of communication, physical aspects of the communication process, and the ends served by interpersonal communication. (Author/KS)

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WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Rex M. Fuller (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 1973) is Assistant Professor of Communication Arts, Madison College

F.H. Goodyear (Ph.D., The University of Texas, 1969) is Associate Professor of Communication Arts, Madison College

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WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Although widely used the term "interpersonal communication," does not have a commonly-accepted definition which clearly distinguishes it from several other communication types. In this paper the lack of specificity, as demonstrated by basic textbooks, is examined in three areas: material and content, physical aspects, and purpose. The ambiguity associated with this term weakens the field of speech communication by making difficult communication among members of the discipline and with others in the academic community.

Although the term "interpersonal communication" has become a commonly used descriptor in speech communication in the last decade, there seems to be no uniform definition for the term and popular conceptions appear to differ significantly. Discussing various terms used to describe the basic course, Bert E. Bradley observed in the opening address of the Southern Speech Communication Association's Workshop on the Basic Courses in Speech Communication that, "The use of the term 'interpersonal communication' results in the greatest lack of clarity."[1] So great is the problem that an investigation of almost any aspect of interpersonal communication must be prefaced with a definition that is appropriate for that discussion only. Often, writers in the field of interpersonal communication attempt to define the term merely by outlining an operational framework in which skills and competencies may be identified.

Some authors, such as Bochner and Kelly, feel that "the specific nature of these interpersonal skills has not been delineated."[2] Others such as Whitsett provide more specific descriptions: ...the course promotes students' self-actualization by improving their self-awareness and self-acceptance. Typical exercises are value clarification, fantasy exploration, and the keeping of autobiographical journals. For

the development of interpersonal skills, the course provides human relations training in listening/perceiving, communicating/responding, and problem-solving."[3] This definition suggests a strong psychology orientation for interpersonal communication theory. However, that approach has not been widely accepted nor employed in the development of interpersonal theory and methodology.

There are, however, some areas of common agreement among writers in the field of interpersonal communication. Ilardo claims that "the main thrust of the field is in the direction of improved person-to-person communication especially at the dyadic and small group levels)."[4] This claim seems consistent with Barnlund's definition, "the investigation of relatively informal social situations in which persons in face-to-face encounters maintain a focused interaction through the reciprocal exchange of verbal and non-verbal cues."[5]

However, some persistent problems plague those who try to determine a specific definition, theory or philosophy of interpersonal communication which could garner general or even widespread acceptance among scholars in communication. For example, what are the limits of interpersonal communication study? What does it include, and what does it exclude? Edward P. J. Corbett advises that "an essential definition is one that designates that which makes a thing what it is and distinguishes that thing from all other things; in other words, it is one that spells out a thing's fundamental nature."[6] The implications of that definition should then be consistently employed. "Interpersonal communication," as it is now employed, does not represent an independent concept. Rather, discussions in articles, textbooks, and courses require the term to assume a variety of nature and definitions.

This paper will identify some of the definitions employed in selected textbooks which seem intended for use in interpersonal communication courses. The method used to determine the definitions will be to examine the authors' views of three dimensions or components of the interpersonal process: (1) materials and contents, (2) physical

aspects of the process, and (3) the ends served by interpersonal communication.

Materials and Content

Discussions of the material and content of interpersonal communication generally refer to messages being shared, transmitted, or received, but the topic of "messages communicated" is the most often addressed with a discussion of modality. Jeffrey and Peterson include all spoken communication involving more than one person.[7] Sereno and Bodaken extend the content of interpersonal messages to include verbal and non-verbal cues.[8] Myers and Myers consider writing, speaking, gestures, and signs as the material of interpersonal communication in their text, The Dynamics of Human Communication;[9] in a later book, Communicating When We Speak, they broaden the material content to include symbol systems, settings, and occasions.[10] Keltner's definition, "... a unique process of symbolic communication that involves interaction between persons,"[11] implies that virtually all of man's attempts to share meaning by any medium is included in the material of interpersonal communication.

Several writers have attempted to focus on precise and limited statements of procedure. Shrope states that in interpersonal communication the "sending and receiving [of messages] occur almost simultaneously."[12] Sereno and Bodaken agree when they state that interpersonal communication is characterized by individuals' "simultaneously sending and receiving messages continuously."[13] Perhaps the least ambiguous statement is made by Hybels and Weaver who say that interpersonal communication "is two-way communication, and to become effective communicators, participants need to develop their ability to receive as well as send messages."[14] Further, they say that "the primary emphasis in interpersonal communication is on recognizing, and hence

approaching or overcoming, barriers to understanding."[15] Thus, these authors introduce the concept of feedback in the interpersonal process.

Many authors do not treat the element of feedback in their discussions of the interpersonal process, but those who do seem to share a considerable degree of vagueness about the topic. Wenburg and Wilmot assert that more sense modalities are applicable in interpersonal communication than in other communication levels or forms and that feedback is immediate.[16] Hughey and Johnson describe interpersonal communication as bi-lateral or multi-lateral rather than uni-lateral.[17] Shrope sees interpersonal communication as constant reciprocal interaction in which both parties take turns as speaker and listener.[18] Patton and Giffin also indicate the importance of feedback by observing that "each person assumes the roles of both sender and receiver of messages."[19] Hybels and Weaver, attempting to give breadth to the definition, offer perhaps the most ambiguous statement regarding feedback by saying that "because interpersonal communication involves participants communicating in close proximity to one another, more channels are utilized than simply those of sight or sound."[20]

Stimulus or cue content and availability as represented by the content and structure of messages communicated during the interpersonal process is largely ignored. Barnlund implies that interpersonal messages are necessarily informal because the social context in which they occur is informal.[21] Brooks asserts that interpersonal communication exists when "persons are engaged directly with each other in the overt and covert transmission and reception of messages."[22] Pace and Boren say that interpersonal communication is the sharing of privately processed meanings.[23] Most other authors do not even address the subject of message content and structure. Instruction regarding the nature of interpersonal messages and their structure is largely absent.

Physical Aspects

Little agreement exists in interpersonal texts concerning the number of participants or the physical arrangement of those participants in the interpersonal event. The potpourri of definitions range from unlimited and vague to very limited and precise. Stewart and D'Angelo offer what seems to be the most vague description in their statement that "interpersonal communication is basically what it sounds like -- communication between ("inter") persons."[24] Pace and Boren are only slightly more specific with a definition that calls for "two or more individuals who agree to focus upon one another as sources of messages."[25] The claim of "face-to-face interaction between people who are consistently aware of each other,"[26] offered by Patton and Giffin, is somewhat less limited and vague.

Tubbs and Moss believe that any activity is interpersonal in which (1) all parties are in close proximity, (2) all parties send and receive messages, and (3) messages include both verbal and non-verbal stimuli.[27] Obviously, Tubbs and Moss have expanded the concept of interpersonal communication by implying that it involves a small number of participants who are physically proximate, but these authors still fail to achieve precise limitations.

Ilardo limits the number of participants somewhat by stating, "the main thrust of interpersonal communication is in the direction of improved person-to-person communication (especially at the dyadic and small group levels).[28] Barbour and Goldberg assert that interpersonal communication is "concerned primarily with dyadic interaction, although interpersonal processes occur in triads and in larger groups.[29] Wenburg and Wilmot limit severely the number of participants by including only "two people participating in a communication transaction,"[30] and Shrope agrees with the statement that interpersonal communication is "communication between two people ... or 'dyadic' communication."[31] Miller and Steinberg slightly alter this stipulation by

saying that "the dominant concept of interpersonal communication holds that it occurs when two or three persons interact face-to-face."[32]

The face-to-face requisite is also mentioned by Hughey and Johnson. They define the event as an "interaction between two or more individuals where each individual both speaks and listens."[33] Sereno and Bodaken further support the notion of face-to-face interaction in their description of an "unstructured and informal communication in which we engage another face to face."[34]

The authors seem generally to agree that interpersonal communication necessitates a close association by participants, but the number of persons involved seems to range from two to "larger groups." The absence of agreement on the number of participants and their physical arrangement, obviously diminishes the possibility of an essential definition of interpersonal communication.

Purposes of Interpersonal Communication

What end is served by interpersonal communication that is not served by other communication forms or events? Some authors have described the purpose of interpersonal communication study so broadly and all-inclusively as to place no limits, whereas others have placed severe restrictions on the purpose. A popular conception is that interpersonal communication is principally concerned with individual personal growth or psychological development. Keltner suggests that interpersonal communication serves as the means of establishing communication relationships with others.[35] Ilardo asserts that "the teacher of interpersonal communication is more concerned with effective communication as a humanizing force than with communication as a means to a predetermined end."[36] These definitions seem to restrict interpersonal communication largely to the personal growth of each individual while relegating the transfer of

meaning to a minor role. Miller and Steinberg offer a definition of purpose that is similar to Ilardo's, but does not exclude predetermined or predicted behavior. Their claim is that "when people communicate, they make predictions about the effects, or outcomes, of their communication behavior."[37] "When predictions are based primarily on a psychological level of analysis, the communicators are engaged in interpersonal communication."[38] Wenburg and Wilmot assert that interpersonal communication is less manipulative than other forms of communication and that, "it is through this type of communication [communication in the interpersonal arena] that we realize our fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of our interpersonal needs and establish and maintain meaningful relationships with others."[39] These statements imply that the purpose of interpersonal communication is the establishment and maintenance of humanized relationships as well as the satisfaction of individual needs. The absence of clear references to "transfer of meaning" suggests a diminution of that aspect of communication.

Similarly, Hybels and Weaver offer a description that makes some broad assumptions about the form of the interpersonal event. Their definition of interpersonal communication is "...how we communicate with one person or a small number of people on an informal, nonstructed level."[40] They add that both participants assume speaker and listener roles. It may be assumed that Hybels and Weaver consider interpersonal communication to be limited to "informal" and "unstructured" communication events. This definition seems to exlude any communication that is planned, structured, or serves any "formal" purpose (whatever formal implies, but apparently meaning those that involve influence, persuasion, or preconceived ends).

Other authors, too, employ the "formal" and "informal" jargon without specific reference. For example, Brooks[41] includes both informal and formal dyadic and small group communication while Wiseman and Barker[42] reserve interpersonal communication for

everyday communication encounters of an informal nature. These two definitions are obviously not totally compatible, but they, as well as others like Stewart and D'Angelo, Pace and Boren, and Jeffrey and Peterson, imply that "informal" communication events reside in the domain of interpersonal communication. Most writers assert that interpersonal relationships are characterized by a "quality of interpersonalness [that] emerges when the persons communicating are willing both to be aware of others as humans instead of objects and to reveal or share something of their own humanness."[43]

Not all authors, however, agree with these premises. Myers and Myers[44] imply that interpersonal communication is any attempt to gain another's response and that simply the involvement of another, to gain a predetermined end or satisfy a perceived need, is the purpose of interpersonal communication. They use the verb "to influence" to describe relationships with others in day-to-day speaking and listening. This definition appears to be contradictory on the issue of persuasion and influence.

Both Myers and Myers[45] and Jeffrey and Peterson[46] attempt to define purposes served by citing a series of examples of interpersonal events. They list communication activities such as giving instructions, taking orders, listening, interviewing, selling, giving advice, making a telephone call, participating in discussions, and sharing feelings. It might be observed that these activities concern pragmatic, and sometimes even pedestrian activities, which seems far removed from the purpose of sharing "humanness." Clearly, these definitions, characterized by vague terms, ambiguous concepts and occasionally outright contradictions, leave little resolved in the search for an essential definition.

Conclusion

The diversity of opinion as exhibited in basic textbooks demonstrates the inconsistency of meaning for the term "interpersonal communication." Because so many authors have offered statements of definition that disagree and are in some instances contradictory, an essential definition of the term seems non-existent. There appears to be no commonly accepted guidelines for determining content material, or expectations in courses taught as "interpersonal communication."

Simply to insert new terms for old ones is an unacceptable procedure. A comparison of the prefaces of Keltner's two texts, Interpersonal Speech Communication : Elements and Structures and Elements of Interpersonal Communication,[47] reveals that the term, "speech-communication" has been exchanged for the currently popular term, "interpersonal communication." The change in terminology appears to be nothing more than a new term, new jargon, for old "truths."

To further complicate the problem many texts asserting a focus on interpersonal communication contain units or chapters devoted to public speaking, interviewing, mass media communication, dyadic communication, and small group communication. These terms seem to possess generally accepted meaning both in theory and in application, but their inclusion in "interpersonal" textbooks raise serious questions. Are they part of "interpersonal communication" or complementary communication forms?

The seeming unavailability of an essential definition, as described by Corbett, may encourage other disciplines to define the term for us. In this way other disciplines may set limits on speech communication content. This condition could ultimately result in our permitting ourselves to be "defined" out of existence. If communication, the sending and receiving of messages between individuals, the process of creating mutual understanding and meaning, is a distinct, viable, and worthy discipline for scholarly inquiry, it should not be encumbered by a vague, ill defined

term. Those outside the discipline, not familiar with the concepts and behaviors of concern, may question our academic and professional validity. Indeed, some scholars within the discipline imply that our validity is questionable. Although we often derrogate the 16th Century Peter Ramus for his attack on rhetoric which awarded inventio and dispositio to the province of logic and rendered elocutio and pronuntiatio the sole concern of rhetoric, we too may fall victim to some 20th Century Ramus who will redefine our discipline for us. The conditions surely seem similar.

FOOTNOTES

[1]An address by Dr. Bert E. Bradley presented at the Southern Speech Communication Association Workshop on the Basic Course, Georgia State University, October 16, 1975. This quotation was taken from page 3 of the printed text.

[2]Arthur P. Bochner and Clifford W. Kelly, "I. Interpersonal Competence: Rationale, Philosophy, and Implementation of a Conceptual Framework," The Speech Teacher, 23 (1974), 279.

[3]A handout by Gavin Whitsett, "An Interpersonal Approach To The Basic Speech Course" given to participants at the Southern Speech Association Workshop on the Basic Course, Georgia State University, October 16, 1975, p.1.

[4]Joseph A. Ilardo, "Why Interpersonal Communication?" The Speech Teacher, 21 (1972), 2.

[5]Dean C. Barnlund, Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 10.

[6]Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 51.

[7]Robert C. Jeffrey and Owen Peterson, Speech (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.43.

[8]Kenneth K. Sereno and Edward M. Bodaken, Trans-Per Understanding Human Communication (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p. 161.

[9]Gail E. Myers and Michele Tolela Myers, The Dynamics of Human Communication (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1973), pp. 9-10.

[10]Meyers and Meyers, Communicating When We Speak (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), p.30.

[11]John W. Keltner, Interpersonal Speech-Communication: Elements and Structures (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), p. 9; and Elements of Interpersonal Communication (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 1.

[12]Wayne Austin Shrope, Experiences in Communication (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich Inc., 1974), p. 9.

[13]Sereno and Bodaken, p. 161.

[14]Saundra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver, II, Speech/Communication (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1974), p. 35.

[15]Hybels and Weaver, p. 35.

[16]John R. Wenburg and William W. Wilmot, The Personal Communication Process (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 28.

[17]Jim D. Hughey and Arlee W. Johnson, Speech Communication (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1975), p. 23.

[18]Shrope, p. 9.

[19]Bobby R. Patton and Kim Giffin, Interpersonal Communication (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 12.

[20]Hybels and Weaver, p. 35.

[21]Barnlund, p. 10.

[22]William D. Brooks, Speech Communication (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1974), p. 10.

[23]R. Wayne Pace and Robert R. Boren, The Human Transaction (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973), p. 308.

[24]John Stewart and Gary D'Angelo, Together: Communicating Interpersonally (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1975), p. 2.

[25]Pace and Boren, p. 308.

[26]Patton and Giffin, p. 12.

[27]Stewart L. Tubbs and Sylvia Moss, Human Communication: An Interpersonal Perspective (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 6-7.

[28]Ilardo, p. 2.

[29]Alton Barbour and Alvin A. Goldberg, Interpersonal Communication: Teaching Strategies and Resources (Urbana, Illinois: ERIC, 1974), p. 6.

[30]Wenburg and Wilmot, p. 22.

[31]Shrope, p. 9.

[32]Gerald R. Miller and Mark Steinberg, Between People: A New Analysis of Interpersonal Communication (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1975), p. 7.

[33]Hughey and Johnson, p. 22.

[34]Sereno and Bodaken, p. 161.

[35]Keltner, p. 10.

[36]Ilardo, p. 2.

[37]Miller and Steinberg, p. 42.

[38]Miller and Steinberg, p. 22.

[39]Wenburg and Wilmot, p. 29.

[40]Hybels and Weaver, p. 4.

[41]Brooks, p. 10.

[42]Gordon Wiseman and Larry Barker, Speech-Interpersonal Communication (New York: Chandler Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 14-15.

[43]Stewart and D'Angelo, p. 25.

[44]Myers and Myers, Dynamics, pp. 9-10.

[45]Myers and Myers, Communicating, p. 19.

[46]Jeffrey and Peterson, p. 35.

[47]Keltner, Interpersonal Speech Communication, preface; and, Elements, preface.